Responding to the Death of a Spouse:
Cultural Understanding vs. Scientific Evidence

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Behavioral and Social Science Research Lecture Series

Abstract

Most people would agree that losing a spouse is one of the most stressful life experiences that is typically encountered. Some people exhibit intense and prolonged distress following such a loss, while others appear to emerge unscathed, or perhaps even strengthened. In this talk, I will explore the diversity of responses to loss, and will examine whether the predominant reactions that are shown are consistent with our cultural beliefs about loss. I will draw on data from a large-scale study following people for approximately a decade, from prior to the death of their spouse until 4 years after the loss. I will discuss several risk factors that influence who is likely to be hit hardest by such a loss, including gender differences in reaction to conjugal loss. I will conclude by discussing future research plans and implications of the work for interventions with bereaved elders.

Biographical Sketch

Camille B. Wortman, Ph.D. is a Professor of Psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. For the past decade, she has served as the director of the Social/Health Psychology Graduate Training Program at Stony Brook. Her research focuses on bereavement, with a particular emphasis on how people react to the sudden, traumatic death of a loved one. She received the Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution in Psychology from the American Psychological Association for this work and has been invited to present the work at national and international conferences. This work has been funded both by federal agencies (the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute on Aging) and private foundations (the MacArthur Foundation, and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety). She has been interviewed about bereavement, sudden, traumatic loss, and the September 11 catastrophe by USA Today, The New York Times, CBS "This Morning," National Public Radio, The Los Angeles Times, and many others.

Dr. Wortman received her Ph.D. from Duke University in 1972. She was on the faculty at Northwestern University for over five years, and on the faculty at the University of Michigan for over a decade. She has completed a large-scale prospective study of conjugal loss, one of which includes psychological, physiological and cognitive measures. In this study, known as the Changing Lives of Older Couples or CLOC project, respondents were interviewed an average of three years prior to losing their spouse and again at 6, 18 and 48 months following the loss. She has also completed several studies on how people react to the sudden, unexpected loss of a spouse or child. These studies have provided clear evidence that compared to control respondents, those who experience the sudden, traumatic loss of a family member show enduring difficulties in nearly all areas of their lives. On the basis of these studies, Dr. Wortman was included in a recent Women in Science exhibit jointly sponsored by the Science Directorate at the American Psychological Association and the National Science Foundation. In recent years, she has received grant support from NIH to continue her research on predictors of response to the loss of a spouse. She has also received funding from J.P. Morgan Chase to develop and offer a training program for clinicians working with those who lost loved ones in the September 11 catastrophe. In addition, she was asked to serve as a consultant to Special Master Kenneth Feinberg regarding the psychological damages resulting from losses suffered on 9/11.

Dr. Wortman has authored over 80 articles and book chapters dealing with grief and loss, and has been invited to speak at numerous institutions of higher learning and national as well as international professional meetings. At present, she is working on two books, one summarizing her research on the loss of a spouse among the elderly, and one designed for clinicians on treatment following the sudden, traumatic loss of a loved one.

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CLOC Baseline Data:
Pre-Loss Predictor Variables

Qualities of the Marriage:

Positive evaluation of the marriage (4 items, alpha = .85)
   (e.g., "How much does your husband/wife make you feel loved and cared for?")

Negative evaluation of the marriage (6 items, alpha = .79)
   (e.g., "How often would you say you and your husband typically have unpleasant disagreements or conflicts?")

Ambivalence about the spouse/marriage (scores on positive and negative items were summed to create an ambivalence scale.)

Interpersonal dependency (5 items, alpha = .75)
   (e.g., "I would feel hopeless if I were deserted by someone I love.")

Dependency on the Spouse (4 items, alpha =.80)
   (e.g., "I would feel completely lost if I didn't have my spouse.")

Avoidant/dismissive attachment (4 items, alpha = .75)
   (e.g., "I don't need other people to make me feel good.")

Interviewer ratings:
Interpersonal comfort (On the basis of your experience with the respondent in the interview, how comfortable would you say the respondent is with other people?)

Interpersonal skill (How skilled would you say the respondent is in handling or dealing with other people?)

Interpersonal warmth (How warm or cold was the respondent to you?)

Coping Resources:
Confidence in one's coping ability (4 items, alpha = .6)
(e.g., "I can handle myself pretty well in a crisis.")

Perceived support from friends and relatives (2 items, alpha = .71)
(e.g., "On the whole, how much do your friends and relatives make you feel loved and cared for?")

Perceived support from children (2 items, alpha = .70)
(e.g., "How much do your children make you feel loved and cared for?)

Availability of Instrumental support (3 items, alpha = .68)
(e.g., "If you and your husband/wife needed extra help with general housework or home maintenance, how much could you count on friends or family members to help you?")

Religiosity:
Personal devotion (4 items, alpha = .83)
(e.g., "In general, how important are religious or spiritual beliefs in your day-to-day life?")

Religious conservatism (3 items, alpha = .65)
(e.g., "Do you ever try to encourage people to believe in Jesus and accept him as their Savior?")

Personality:
Dimensions of the five-factor model of personality were assessed using an abbreviated version of the NEO-PI (emotional stability, agreeableness, openness, extraversion and conscientiousness)

Introspection (3 items, alpha = .75)
    (e.g., "I often think about why my life is the way it is.")

World View:
  Belief in a just world (6 items, alpha = .76)
    (e.g., "By and large, people deserve what they get.")

  Belief in personal injustice (i.e., that the world is particularly unjust to oneself) (3 items, alpha = .77)
    (e.g., "Other people always seem to get the breaks.")

  Belief in the uncontrollability of negative events (4 items, alpha = .67)
    (e.g., "Bad things can happen to anyone at any time.")

  Acceptance of death (4 items, alpha = .57)
    (e.g., "Death is simply part of the process of life.")

Context in Which the Loss Occurred:
  * Spousal illness (whether spouse had "serious ongoing health problems" prior to his death)
  * Caregiving (hours per week)
  * Caregiving strain (whether caregiving was experienced as stressful, and extent to which caregiving interfered with other activities)

  * assessed at 6 months post-loss

Table 1 Group differences in pre-bereavement variables (continued on next page)

	Resilient	Depressed-improved	Common Grief	Chronic Grief	Chronic Depression	
Quality of conjugal relationship						
Pos. evaluation	-0.03 (1.05)	-0.77 (1.42)	0.07 (0.62)	0.13 (0.73)	-0.53 (1.70)	$\underline{F}$(4,180=3.16* dfi
Neg. evaluation	-0.11 (0.97)	0.61 (1.47)	-0.22 (1.00)	-0.32 (1.14)	0.19 (1.26)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=3.01* dfi
Ambivalence	0.67 (1.31)	1.82 (2.34)	0.51 (1.41)	0.35 (0.77)	1.04 (2.05)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=3.67** dfi
Interpersonal dependency	-0.11 (0.89)	0.09 (0.96)	0.14 (1.13)	0.31 (0.88)	0.71 (1.02)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=3.30* cgh
Dependency on spouse	-0.29 (1.10)	-0.42 (1.30)	0.13 (0.79)	0.19 (0.86)	0.22 (0.60)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=2.58* cd
Avoidant/dismissive attachment	-0.08 (0.95)	0.09 (1.15)	-0.09 (1.14)	-0.16 (1.00)	-0.14 (0.84)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=0.28
Interviewer ratings						
Interpersonal skill	4.37 (0.96)	3.95 (0.92)	4.18 (0.85)	4.16 (0.93)	4.00 (0.82)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=1.31
Interpersonal warmth	1.46 (0.98)	1/38 (0.50)	1.41 (0.51)	1.39 (0.56)	1.38 (0.50)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=0.11
Interpersonal comfort	4.48 (0.88)	3.95 (0.97)	4.32 (0.84)	4.26 (0.86)	4.19 (0.75)	$\underline{F}$(4,180)=1.89

Coping resources
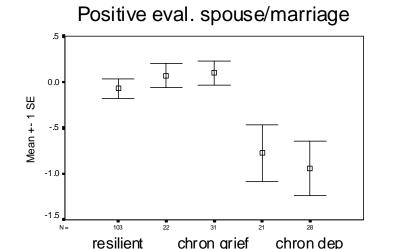
Perceived coping efficacy	-0.07 (0.96)	0.22 (1.25)	0.10 (1.11)	-0.05 (0.72)	0.90 (1.07)	F(4,180)=3.53* aghj
Personal religious devotion	0.2 (1.00)	0.11 (0.98)	0.40 (0.69)	-0.06 (0.82)	-0.12 (1.18)	F(4,180)=1.26
Personal religious conservatism	0.05 (1.10)	-0/03 (0.90)	-0.02 (0.91)	0.05 (1.09)	-0.16 (1.06)	F(4,180)=0.16
Introspection	-0.19 (0.95)	0.54 (1.12)	-0.16 (0.96)	-0.10 (1.12)	0.47 (1.02)	F(4,180)=3.39**dfi

Table 1. Group differences in pre-bereavement variables (continued from previous page)

Extraversion	0.29 (0.95)	-0.07 (1.01)	0.46 (0.79)	0.01 (0.67)	-0.48 (0.57)	F(4,180)=4.13** gij
Emotional stability	0.27 (1.03)	-0.51 (0.93)	0.14 (0.98)	0.16 (0.62)	-0.83 (0.84)	F(4,180)=6.72*** adefgij
Conscientiousness	0.29 (0.95)	-0.01 (0.82)	0.16 (1.01)	0.02 (0.78)	-0.29 (1.01)	F(4,180)=1.88
Agreeableness	0.24 (1.03)	0.06 (1.04)	0.52 (1.04)	0.29 (0.82)	0.10 (0.91)	F(4,180)=0.71
Openness	0.24 (1.00)	0.08 (1.11)	0.47 (0.77)	-0.15 (1.03)	-0.03 (1.06)	F(4,180)=1.63

World view (meaning)

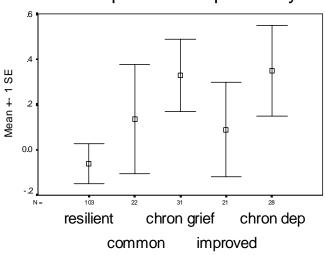|						
Just world	0.21 (0.96)	0.06 (0.84)	-0.47 (0.98)	0.03 (0.83)	-0.26 (1.13)	F(4,180)=3.00* c
Personal injustice	-0.11 (0.95)	0.65 (1.12)	-0.37 (0.87)	-0.13 (0.96)	0.28 (1.01)	F(4,180)=3.76** dfij

Uncontrollability	-0.13 (1.01)	0.02 (1.04)	-0.21 (1.22)	0.20 (0.84)	0.52 (0.72)	$\underline{F}(4,180)=2.00+$ gj
Acceptance of death	0.26 (0.74)	0.12 (1.00)	-0.30 (0.74)	-0.34 (1.11)	-0.15 (1.13)	$\underline{F}(4,180)=3.99**$ ce
Context						
Social support: friend/relative	0.40 (0.96)	-0.04 (0.88)	0.37 (0.50)	0.21 (0.99)	-0.08 (0.77)	$\underline{F}(4,180)=1.34$
Social support: children	0.25 (0.76)	-0.30 (1.17)	0.11 (0.67)	0.21 (0.96)	0.26 (0.81)	$\underline{F}(4,180)=1.63$
Instrumental support	0.22 (1.00)	-0.47 (1.04)	-0.19 (0.94)	-0.21 (1.01)	-0.35 (1.13)	$\underline{F}(4,180)=3.17*$ cfg

Significant differences ($\underline{p}<.05$): a = chronic grief vs. chronic depression; b = chronic grief vs. common grief; c = chronic grief vs. resilient; d = chronic grief vs. depressed-improved; e = resilient vs. common grief; f = resilient vs. depressed-improved; g = resilient vs. chronic depression; h = depressed-improved vs. chronic depression; i = depressed-improved vs. common grief; j = chronic depression vs. common grief.
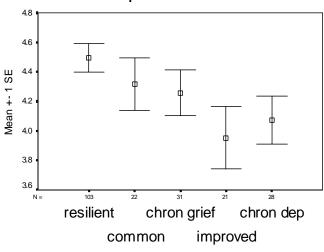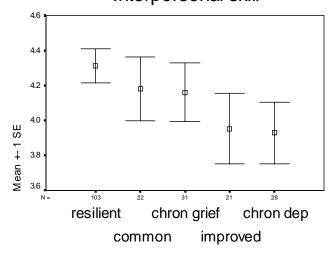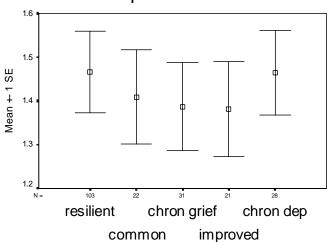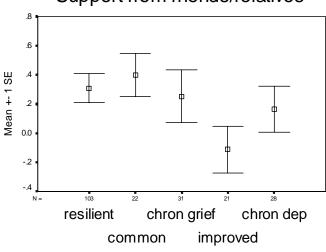

Positive eval. spouse/marriage

Negative eval. spouse/marriage

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Support from friends/relatives

Support from children

Instrumental support

Perceived coping efficacy

Personal religious devotion

Personal religious conservatism

Extraversion

Emotional stability

Belief in a just world

Belief in personal injustice

Belief in uncontrollability

Acceptance of death